



## Conflict in Diaspora: A study of two generations in azouz begag's *The Shantytown Kid*

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### Abstract

It will be the aim of this paper to examine the conflict in identity in first and second generation immigrants. While the first generation immigrants are unable to sever their bond with their motherland, the second generation identify themselves with the new land. Being born and raised here, they do not seek to alienate themselves in order to create a space that will enable them to be sympathetic towards and one with the homeland. The older generation inhabitants find respite in alienating themselves deliberately and keeping alive the memory of their culture and native land. This is the major rift that immigrants, often first and second generation immigrants experience and cannot process, ultimately leading to a separation and a mirroring tendency of the customs of the new land in the latter. These elements in diaspora recounted through a father-son relationship have been captured in Azouz's novel and the present paper is an examination of such barriers and conflicts in identity.

**Keywords:** identity, diaspora, conflict, immigrants

### Introduction

'Diaspora' is the movement of a community from its place of origin to a foreign land and, conversely the term is used also to denote the community undertaking the journey that will result in its displacement. Though it has come to be used very commonly without its particular and traditional reference to the displacement of the Jews, it still carries the connotation of not only deportation but also a severing of ties between the homeland and the inhabitants who decide to move out. However, what is of primary importance in assessing such a community is the reactions that the generations have towards their homeland and towards the land they have chosen as their temporary homeland. The subtleties surrounding the acceptance of a foreign land become a major cause of disjuncture in the lives of the first generation immigrants. This, however, is not a concern for the second generation immigrants who are born in the land of exile. They begin to associate more with the exilic land than the one to which they belong. It is their notion that they, by lieu of being born in the foreign land, are natural inhabitants of it and do not belong to an obscure land which they have no memory of and connections with. They do not subscribe to the same set of ideologies as their parents. They neither have any emotional connect nor any physical affiliations to the nation of their roots. This is highly evident in Azouz Begag's *The Shantytown Kid*. This paper will assess the gap and the involvement of the two generations—the first generation immigrants and the second generation—in the question of the reception and attitude towards the nation. Supplementary to this is the question of identity formation and national consciousness. Memory plays an important part in the shaping of identity. The role of language is crucial too in our understanding of the generational gap. All these have been beautifully expounded in Begag's novel, which captures all the tensions as well as insecurities that the two generations face, although they are different in nature. This paper aims to study the forces that drive the two generations which are always in opposition to each other and never in harmony and coexistence.

*The Shantytown Kid* by Azouz Begag is an autobiographical bildungsroman where Begag charts three to four years of his childhood, incorporating the various tensions, the subtleties that go with identity politics, which is troubled by his being an immigrant, a second generation immigrant at that, and, born not in his own country but in the country of their migration. Begag wonderfully, and in the narrative of and by a ten year old, expresses the various incidents, the incongruities, the clashes between the two generations, his coming to terms with his identity and etching out an identity of his own, which is neither akin to the Algerian one that his parents cling to nor a complete French identity. He recognizes himself as a 'beur' and goes on to establish a different identity altogether, one that has been enlightened by education. From early on in his life, he used education as a means to escape the dreariness of an immigrant identity. He was bright as a student, but his cultural identity grouped him, in the eyes of the teacher, as another of those truant, misbehaved students. But he transcended all those conceptions and misconceptions through his merit. It is through school that he enters civilization and there is no looking back after that. In the novel, the two generations have been juxtaposed in order to show the difference in their concept about nation and nationhood. While the first generation still reminisces about the past and relies on memory and nostalgia in order to find impulse enough to go on living in the foreign land because he is fuelled and driven by the desire to finally return home one day; the second generation, born with no ties with the homeland itself cannot partake in the father's dream and considers the foreign land the only national affiliation that he has ever had. While the child moves on in life, academically and culturally, through assimilation, the father cannot participate in such cultural intermixing and therefore goes back time and again to the Chaâba, symbolically representing his homeland. He organizes festivals such as the circumcision and initiation of the boy. His modes of disciplining his kids—be it thrashing them or controlling their waywardness by violent methods, such as destroying their bikes—all are

akin to the his native mode of disciplining. His preference for African cuisine, such as couscous, remains with him all his life. He is, still in his heart of hearts, one with his native country while the son has expelled every notion of native culture from his heart and mind. This dichotomy is wonderfully captured in the novel and probes the reader to think what, then, is the 'native' and its significance in terms of culture. Is the 'native' re-cultured or is he successfully able to cling on to his past or does he negotiate between his former Arab-Muslim identity and his present of a reduced being while the succeeding generations are clearer for they are more naturalized to the ways of the foreign land and know that to be the 'home'. Alec G. Hargreaves writes, in his introduction to Begag's *Ethnicity and Equality: France in the Balance*, that before "moving to France migrants internalized the cultural norms of their home country, which they would attempt to transmit to their children they were to raise in France" (Begag, 2007, xi) <sup>[1]</sup>. This, the first generation migrants hoped would keep the memory and values of the homeland alive and thriving but more often than not this results in a conflict of identity between the first and the succeeding generations.

Bouزيد, Azouz's father and the chief of the Chaâba, is a first generation immigrant from North Africa, who had come to France in the huge migration that had happened during the 1960s and '70s, from North Africa, especially from the regions of Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria, to reconstruct France after the Second World War. There was a huge requirement for cheap, unskilled labour and these men provided for the same. These indentured migrant workers soon constituted the Moroccan transnational labour and diaspora. They continued to stay back in France and even brought their wives and kids in the small ghettos that they built, called 'Chaâba'. They constructed a small society of people of the same origins who had both come together looking for jobs or separately and settled down in these makeshift colonies of according to the native population. These people, though had settled in their temporary houses in a temporary country, always had the hope of going back to their own country one day. They resisted every form of a new identity thoroughly and stringently in every way of life and being that they could. "What use would it be to them to learn the language of exile, since they were going to go back home, they thought? One day" (Begag, 2010, 2) <sup>[2]</sup>. They would resist not only the language of the foreigners but also their customs, food habits, technologization and innovation. They would create a small world of their own akin to the nation they belonged to. They felt at home in their own secure little homeland in a foreign world. Their interaction with the outer world was limited and they restricted any incursions and interjections in their beliefs and customs vehemently. They were inscribed in the community feeling and a strong sense of unity. It is an attack and a possible breakdown of that communal machinery that unnerves Bouزيد. It is the moment when people start leaving the ghetto for flats in the more urbane parts, such as Lyon. It was a harsh blow to Bouزيد whose dream of returning home was being repeatedly asserted as being a mythical possibility merely and not something that can be realized. He never speaks French his entire life and considers himself a true Algerian despite the various influences that he may be subject to. Also, his religious identity as a Muslim is something that is unbreachable and unalterable. All these are markers of his identity and he lives by anchoring onto

them. He tries to impose this identification on his son through the circumcision ritual so as to contain his son within his world, so that he may, in future, propagate his dream of returning to the homeland. But the son does not share the same sentiments as the father. He gets circumcised so that he can get his new red bike. The son has no connection with the religious or national ideals and beliefs. He rather considers himself French and is ashamed of the menial jobs that people from his Chaâba do and which he is made to do by his mother, in order to earn money, like his cousins. The mother, very Algerian in her thoughts and being, cannot envisage a future that education will unfold for her son and therefore urges him to go to the market. They still think of the world according to a bygone era and locale. They cannot come out of it, even though they physically have. The second generation is completely antagonistic to hard, menial and skill-less labour. He wants to become an intellectual, he is influenced and inspired by his teachers at school and the poetry he reads. He aspires such highness. He begins emulating them. He begins sitting in the front row in order to be able to attend better and so that the teacher. He thinks he does not belong to the physical space that has been allotted to him and wants to affect a change in his status which will be at par with his mentally constructed one by effecting a change in their place of living. He wants to transcend his cultural and ethnic background by his academic achievements. But this comes at a cost. While his father is proud of him that he will not be a mason just as him, that he will be civilized like the lot in whose land he is encamped, Azouz's friends taunt him by pointing out that he is no longer one of them but is sort of a hybrid caught up between two cultures and therefore he is not a true to his ethnicity. While Azouz never wanted to be a hybrid but belong firmly to the greater collective, that is the French, he understands that being so comes with a price to pay. He is at times ashamed to own up to his own identity for he cannot identify with it. This is the problem that most of the second generation immigrants have—one of identification with a culture. There is a term for the second generation of immigrants in French, 'beur', which means the children of the first generation immigrants who were born in France. Bouزيد takes pride that his son was born in Lyons and not in Africa but does not want to make his son a complete Frenchman. This dichotomy is however absent in the child who begins by identifying with the nation in which he was born. Years later, the grown up reflects, "I tore myself away from the 'communitarian we' that often is the foundation of the social connection among immigrant families and that sinks any individual attempt to become autonomous" (Begag, 2010, 3) <sup>[2]</sup>. Even while growing up, the child had a vivid consciousness of his difference from his parents, uncles, and their friends in and around the Chaâba. This gets intensified in the episode where when Azouz goes off to a new school, l'école-Leo-Lagrange, in a desperate attempt to befriend a boy, he passes off his identity as a Jew and later on refuses to interact with his mother, who donned in a Burkha will give his secret out. This is because of the pressure of getting assimilated, being one among the crowd, not being ostracized from it. The child, a mere eleven year old, is conscious of it and therefore feels the need to lie. He feels being a Jew is even better than identifying himself as an immigrant Muslim. A Jew still has the identity as part of the national mould, which the immigrants do not.

The tension between the two generations and the concept of nation is beautifully explored through a motif—that of the creation of the Chaâba, which, in itself is a re-enactment of the faraway ‘home’. But the second generation immigrants could find no emotions involved with a community living or even a sense of oneness among their own people but rather were driven by the deep desire to belong to the larger culture, and thus coveted an urban life and hankered after it. For Azouz, a Lyon life is more preferable than the deplorable Chaâba, unaware of the emotions that his father has invested in the place. But for Bouzid, the Chaâba is a reenactment of ‘home’, but once in the uptown Lyon, he cannot connect with that life and therefore, reverts back to the Chaâba time and again. Brubaker’s theory of “Boundary-Maintenance” (Brubaker, 2005, 6) <sup>[4]</sup> can be applied to explain Bouzid’s peculiarity. He wanted to separate himself and his community so that there may be no external influence infiltrating in his closed community. “Boundaries can be maintained by deliberate resistance to assimilation through self-enforced endogamy or other forms of self-segregation”, says Brubaker (Brubaker, 2005, 6) <sup>[4]</sup>. On most accounts, boundary-maintenance is an indispensable criterion of diaspora. It is this that enables one to speak of a diaspora as a distinctive ‘community’, held together by a distinctive, active solidarity, as well as by relatively dense social relationships, that cut across state boundaries and link members of the diaspora in different states into a single ‘transnational community’. But it is this closed world that the child is able to transcend, thereby crossing the lines of demarcation. For Azouz, the sense of ‘home’ is very loose with no strings attached, because he is already in a flux. He appreciates the change, while the likes of his father dreamed of the native land. For the child, home is a means of identity. If he belongs to the newly built apartments of Lyon, he will be more acceptable, and have a higher ease of access to the majority—that is the French, than what he would have had he been one from the Chaâba. “I knew that I lived in a shantytown of shacks made of planks of wood and corrugated iron roofs and that it was the poor who lived that way” (Begag, 2007, 45) <sup>[1]</sup>. A sociocultural space plays as important a role as does history. If Azouz and his family is a product of the Colonial period and carry that haunting legacy with them, then their habitation in the French land and the impact it has in shaping their identities is no less, too. The French culture is most conspicuous in Azouz’s life through the space that is the school. There he meets the French boys who are always properly dressed, obedient and without the slightest sign of dirt on their nails. He is attracted by such a culture and finds his own, back home, as obverse to all that is acceptable in society, outside the Chaâba. He is divided between the two spaces of school and home, initiated by language. Language becomes a barrier as much as a progressive element, necessary for emancipation. In a lively discussion about correct behaviour in class, while the French students had much to say, Begag observes, “[w]e Arab kids had nothing to say” (Begag, 2007, 45) <sup>[3]</sup>. Azouz’s sense of being an Arab and his identity as the same is hindered as though in being raised as an Arab kid, he learns to read and write in French and is given moral lessons as understood by the majority ethnic French. Identity is shaped not according to his indigenous culture but one coherent to a foreign land.

In denying his own culture, Azouz is never devoid of it; he cannot extricate himself. He gets himself into a heated debate with his classmates while trying to explicate what is it like in his culture and he is not ashamed to own it up. Identity formation is not linear. It has multiple sources and is just not the context into which one is born. It is both within and without. It is a dissociation and an inevitable link mediated by history and place and validated by language.

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